

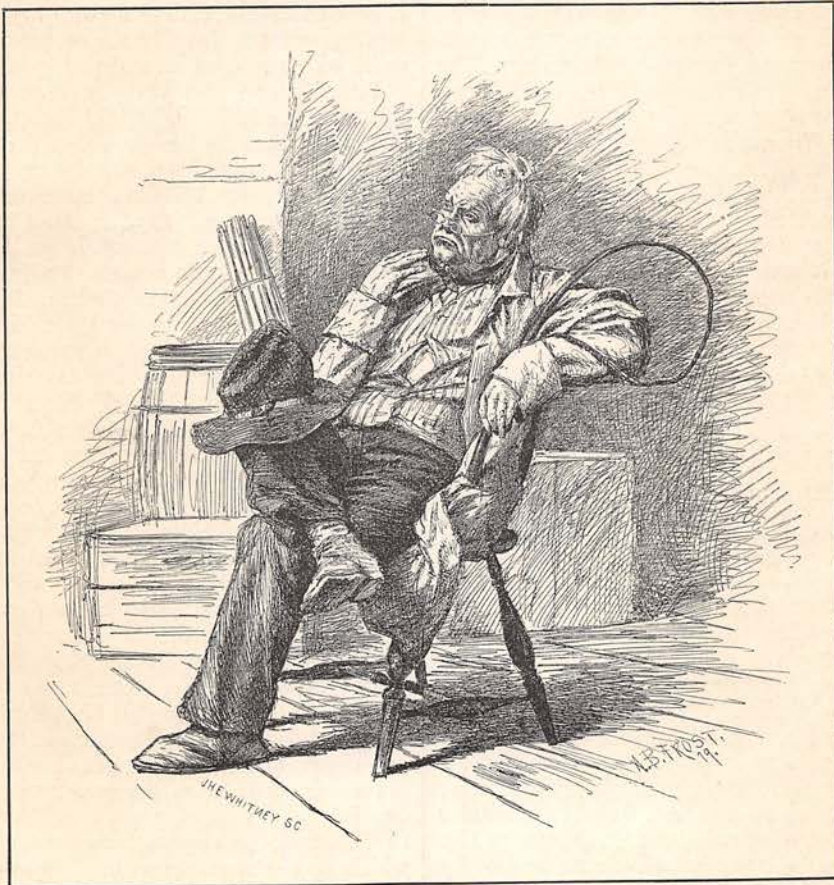
SCRIBNER'S MONTHLY.

VOL. XVIII.

JULY, 1879.

No. 3.

THE AMERICAN ON THE STAGE.



MR. JOHN E. OWENS AS "SOLON SHINGLE."

If we cast a rapid glance over the stage of the United States, seeking to see what class of drama succeeds best and lasts longest, it is soon evident that a piece in which the most prominent feature is the exhibition of an American type has the greatest chance of gaining popular approval. It may be the American of fact, as our Southern friend, *Colonel Mulberry Sellers*, or his Eastern relative, *Judge Bardwell Slot*, or it may be the

American of legend, as the immortal *Rip Van Winkle* of our own Hudson, or the stalwart *Davy Crockett* of the West,—for although *Crockett* was once an actual entity he is now no more than the immaterial excuse for an infinity of legend. Plays without this central and locally characteristic personage,—plays of French or English or German, or even now and then of American authorship, may seem for a time to be the fashion ;

but they rarely wear as well as the cheaper and less artistic homespun. That the most of these American products are crude and unrefined, merely the raw material out of which a skillful artificer might make a symmetrical masterpiece, admits of no dispute. An apt epigram is afloat—asccribed to Mr. Boucicault—to the effect that “all that the Americans seem to recognize as dramatic here is the caricature of character, and that is what the successful plays are—caricature of eccentric character set in a weak dramatic framework.” This, like most epigrams, is a smart setting of a half truth. Americans recognize the character through the caricature, accepting the latter only for lack of the former. The want is want of art on the part of the authors, not want of appreciation on the part of audiences. When a strongly marked character is put before them, they will be only the more glad to receive it, if it is artistically developed and presented, and if the action in which it takes part is skillfully ordered. But in general, it is true, the work is not skillfully or artistically done. In general, American comedy, reaching after comic truth, succeeds only in grasping realistic farce. At one time, we have the simplicity and directness of “Davy Crockett;” at another, the vulgar and vapid inanity of “Our Boarding-House,” which

—“filled the stage with all the crowd
Of fools pursuing and of fools pursued.
Whose ins and outs no ray of sense discloses,
Whose deepest plot is how to break folks’ noses.”

But a striving to be a mirror of manners, to reflect human nature as affected by its American environment, has at all times been visible on the stage of our nation, ever since it was a nation. “On the 16th of April, 1786, was performed,” says William Dunlap, in his invaluable history of our early theater, “the first American play which had ever been got up on a regular stage, by a regular company of comedians.” It was “The Contrast,” a comedy in five acts, written by Royal Tyler, afterward Chief-Justice of Vermont. In this first of American plays is to be found the first of stage Yankees. “The comedy,” says Dunlap, “is extremely deficient in plot, dialogue, or incident, but has some marking in the characters, and in that of *Jonathan*, played by Wignell, a degree of humor and knowledge of what is termed Yankee dialect, which, in the hands of a favorite performer, was relished by an audience gratified by the appearance of home manufacture,—a feeling which was soon exchanged

for a most discouraging contempt for every literary home-made effort.” This American distaste for American work, which forced Dunlap to pass off as English his own translations from the German, lasted nearly fifty years, and it was not until well into the second quarter of this century that the American began to make a stand on his own stage. For a score of years or more after 1800, plays taken from Scott’s novels were more frequent and apparently more popular than plays taken from those of Cooper; but as soon as the century got out of its teens the American novelist caught up with his British predecessor, and became as great a favorite as he with play-makers and play-goers.

Few of those who have by heart Woodworth’s little lyric, “The Old Oaken Bucket,” know that its author was a dramatist, and that it was in his pastoral opera, “The Forest Rose, or American Farmers,” produced in October, 1825, at the Chatham Theatre, that the Yankee made his definite re-appearance on the stage. And in “The Forest Rose,” as in “The Contrast,” he was a *Jonathan*, acted at first by a Mr. Simpson, but soon appropriated by “Yankee” Hill, with whom it was always a favorite part. A few months after, James H. Hackett, having been unfortunate in business, adopted the stage as a profession; and, influenced partly perhaps by the recent production of “The Forest Rose,” and partly by the great success he had achieved in the telling of a Yankee story, he determined to devote himself in a measure to the acting of Yankee parts, which served also as an excellent foil to his broken-French characters, and gave him occasion for showing that versatility of which every actor seeks to give proof. Success attended his efforts, and Hackett* was for many years one of the most prominent figures on our stage. Nor was his acting confined to this country; he was one of the first of American actors to go to England, seeking success in the land which had hitherto provided America with most of its actors and actresses, and which was rather surprised at receiving anything in return.

* A son of Hackett is now Recorder of the city of New York, a relationship which gives point to the note at the bottom of the printed programme issued during the Christmas holidays, a few years ago, by the inmates of our state-prison. “Happy New-Year, 1875. Grand entertainment at the Sing Sing Prison, to commence at 8 A. M. * * * * N. B. Tickets of admission may be had at the Court of General Sessions. John K. Hackett, Manager. No extra charge for reserved seats.”

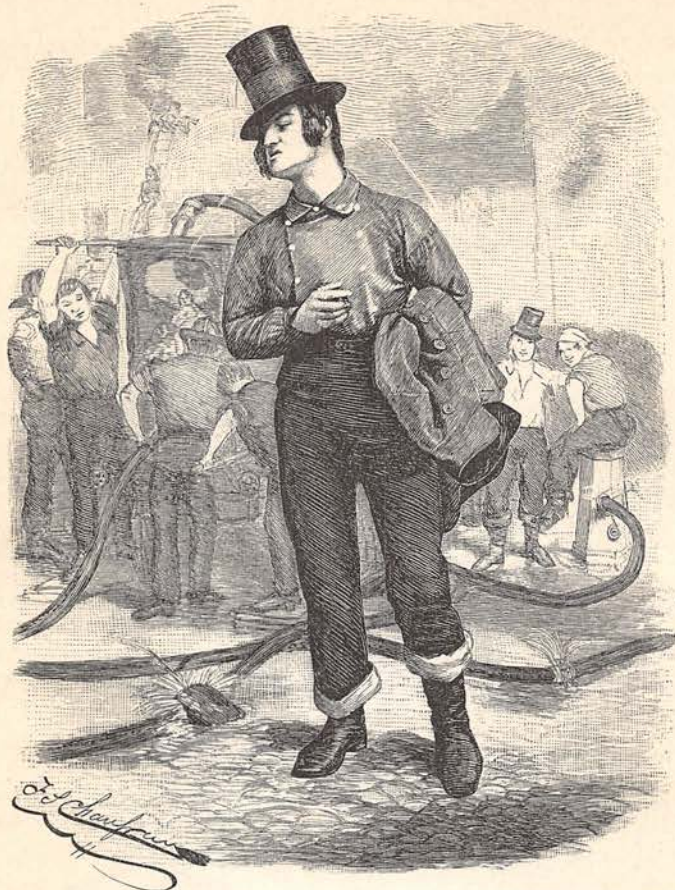
Hackett's first success as an actor of Yankee parts was in 1828, in his own alteration of the farce by George Colman the younger, "Who Wants a Guinea?" into "Jonathan in England," in which the original British *Solomon Gundy* is changed into an American *Solomon Swap*,—a rather high-handed conversion, which greatly excited Colman's ire when, as examiner of plays, he was called upon to license for performance in London this perversion of his own handiwork. Five or six years later, Hackett repeated the attempt, playing *Paul Pry* in Yankee dialect!—surely one of the most curious experiments in the history of the drama. He did not, however, confine himself to these alterations, but sought diligently for wholly original American parts; and, after two or three ventures, he made a great success, in 1831, as *Colonel Nimrod Wildfire*, in a comedy called "The Lion of the West," written for him by one of the foremost figures in our literature then, although now well-nigh forgotten—James K. Paulding. The part suited him so well that when in England afterward he had a sequel to it written by Bayle Bernard, called "The Kentuckians," in which he, of course, appeared as *Colonel Nimrod*

The "Forest Rose" and Hackett's *Solomon Swap* revealed the theatrical possibilities of the Yankee character, and when Hackett went to England, in 1833, other actors were prompt to seize the occasion. The only one who was capable of stepping into his shoes was George Handel Hill, best remembered now as "Yankee" Hill. He not only played *Jonathan*, but appropriated *Solomon Swap*, making Hackett almost as indignant as Hackett had made Colman. Hill had been on the stage for years before Woodworth's play turned his attention to Yankee parts; and, while he lacked Hackett's culture and advantages, he probably acted the broad Down-Easter with less effort, and therefore more effect. Mr. Ireland, a careful critic, preferred Hill to Hackett in Yankee parts, and even intimates that it was Hill's success which led Hackett to rely less on this one dialect, and to develop his broken German in "Rip Van Winkle," and his broken French in "M. Mallet." In imitation and emulation of Hackett, Hill went to London in 1836, acting Yankee parts at Drury Lane and the Haymarket;

the English now began to have some slight notion of American peculiarities, thanks to the elder Mathews's "Trip to America." Hill even performed twice in Paris; but I have not been able to find any contemporary French criticism of his acting. Just what effect *Hiram Dodge*, the Yankee peddler, would have produced upon M. Jules Janin, it would be curious to know. If the French did not take to this part any better than they took to *Asa Trenchard* in 1867, I doubt whether the performance was very lively. But it was of an American audience that Hill used to tell one of his most amusing stories. He once "showed"—to use a professional phrase—in a town in the western part of New York, where no theatrical performance had ever been given. He found the audience assembled with the women seated on one side of the hall, the men on the other, exactly as they were used to sit in church; and throughout the play the most solemn silence was observed. They were attentive, but they gave no evidence of approval or displeasure; there was no applause, no laughter; there was not even a smile;



MR. JAMES H. HACKETT AS "NIMROD WILDFIRE," IN "THE LION OF THE WEST." (FROM AN ORIGINAL DRAWING FROM LIFE BY A. ANDREWS. COPIED BY PERMISSION OF H. B. BOLT.)



MR. F. S. CHANFRAU AS "MOSE." (BY PERMISSION, AFTER LITHOGRAPH DRAWN BY JAMES BROWN.)

all was solemn stillness. Hill did his utmost to break the ice; he did everything a clever comedian could do, but in vain. He flung himself against their rigidity; it was no use. The audience was evidently on its best behavior, and the curtain came down at last amid a silence oppressive and almost melancholy. After the play, Hill, worn out by his extra exertion and mortified at his want of success, was passing through a public room of his hotel, when he was stopped by a tall country-man with the remark:

"Say, mister, I was in to the play to-night."

"Were you?" said Hill. "You must have been greatly entertained."

"Well, I was! I tell you what it is now, my mouth is all sore a-straining to keep my face straight. And if it hadn't been for the women, I'd 'a' laughed right out in meetin'."

Following in the footsteps of Hackett and Hill, and playing parts which differed but little from theirs in kind, came Dan Marble.

Taking advantage of the Sam Patch excitement, he appeared as *Sam Patch* in a little drama of that name, in which we find the first of those "sensation headers," or frightening leaps, with which later play-goers have been made acquainted in the "Colleen Bawn" and the "Romance of a Poor Young Man." "Sam Patch" was first acted in 1836 and its success started Marble as a "star." Ten years later he appeared as *Sam Patch in France*. His biographer gives the names of a score or more of plays in which he acted a Yankee, most of them having been written expressly for him. Two of the best of these were the "Vermont Wool-dealer," and "Yankee Land," both by Cornelius A. Logan, a Western comedian, a brother of the senator and the father of Miss Eliza Logan. Another of Marble's plays was "Family Ties," a comedy to which was awarded a prize of \$500 offered by the actor for the best play suited for his own acting; it was written by T. M. Field, a well-

known comic writer of those days under the name of "Straws," and now remembered as the father of Miss Kate Field. Marble, although then popular, was an actor fond of very coarse and broad effects of a kind which would now meet with no acceptance.

We have now come nearly to the middle of the century and have seen the gradual growth of that strange creature, the stage-Yankee, as unnatural surely as the stage-Cockney or the stage-Frenchman. In nearly all of these plays of Hackett's, and Hill's, and Marble's, and of Silsbee's, who in turn came to the front as an actor of Yankee parts—in nearly all of them is to be detected a strong odor of wooden nutmegs and shoepeg oats, in nearly all of them is to be heard much bragging and tall talk, and much sharp practice is to be seen. There was none of the quiet humor of the "Biglow Papers," or of "Oldtown Folks." The stage-Yankee was coarse, exaggerated and extravagant; the real Yankee, if he ever had been like the attempt at reflecting him, had long ceased to bear any recognizable resemblance to the caricature of succeeding actors. And as the Yankee on the stage had met with appreciation merely because he was in some measure at least a presentation of the truth, so as soon as he had crystallized into that impossible being, the stage-Yankee, so soon did he begin to pass out of the public approval. And for the first ten years of the second half of the century, our theaters saw but little of him, saw him indeed in a state of decay,—and he has not since shown many signs of vigor.

It is related that when Thackeray was last in New York he expressed a great desire to see and converse with the "Bowery boy," indigenous to this city and now extinct, but then flourishing freely in the favorable atmosphere of the Volunteer Fire Department. One day, in Union Square, a specimen of this class was pointed out to the inquisitive novelist.

"Can I speak to him?" asked he. "And what shall I say?"

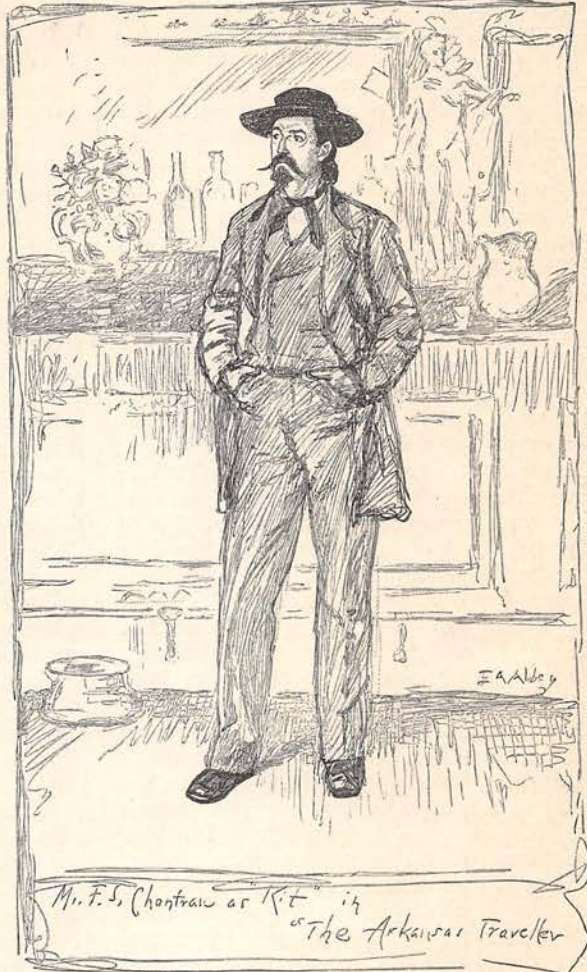
"Oh, anything," was the answer of a

friend standing by. "Ask him your way. He is affable enough."

And the tall Englishman walked up to the rather short, red-shirted American and, after some hesitation, said:

"I want to go to the Bowery."

Looking up at the speaker, the Bowery boy amiably answered:



"Well, you can go, sonny, ef you don't stay long!"

It was this type of character—this ignorant and vulgar fellow, this rough-hewn, good-hearted fire-laddy—that made the next stage-success in this city. It was discovered that the public was interested in seeing a photographic transfer from street-life. Like many another great discovery, this was the result of accident. In 1848 there was a little

theater in Broadway, near Howard street, called the Olympic, managed by Mitchell and modeled in part at least on the London Olympic of Madame Vestris, and famed for its farces and burlesques. It was here that the little ballet interlude, "The Maiden and the Savage," taken from "Nicholas Nickleby," was performed to crowded houses, with Mitchell as *Crummles*; and here, February 15th, 1848, for the benefit of the prompter Baker, was brought out a hasty sketch called "A Glance at New York," into which the New York fireman had been introduced. The actor cast for *Mose* was a young New Yorker named Chanfrau. He imitated his prototype to the life; he had the dress, the look, the tone, the manner of the real *Mose*. So skillfully was it done, that Mitchell, the manager, seeing him in the green-room before the piece began, took him for a real fireman who had intruded himself behind the scenes and asked him what he wanted there. The play was wretched, but the reality of Mr. Chanfrau's personation took effect immediately; the piece was at once re-arranged; the part of *Mose* was amplified; a partner for him was introduced—his "gal" *Lize*, charmingly acted by Miss Mary Taylor; and then *Mose* was the success of the season, running seventy nights—a very long run in a city of but little more than four hundred thousand inhabitants. Other theaters were anxious to share the popularity of the player, and for a long time Mr. Chanfrau acted the part twice nightly, once at the Olympic and again at the Chatham. For a few days he even played it three times a night, the third performance being given in Newark. "A Glance at New York" is in print and any one can see what a coarse and vulgar piece of work it is. The dozen other plays in which *Mose* appeared in the next few years are of the same character: merely rough outline sketches in which one figure was firmly filled in—this rounded completeness of the central character being wholly due to the photographic skill of the actor. Among these crude compositions were "Mose in California," which ran twelve weeks; "Mose in China," and "Mose in a Muss." As time passed on, the interest of the public in the part slackened and the character itself began to pass out of existence—for, in these days of paid fire departments and self-propelling steam-engines, *Mose* would find his occupation gone and would sigh in vain for a congenial sphere. But before the fireman finally faded from sight in New York,

Mr. De Bar took him over to London—where of course he found himself without a friend or even an acquaintance; and Mr. John E. Owens carried him to Philadelphia, where he was called *Jakey*, and where his stay was pleasant and profitable.

It is very rare that an actor who has made so marked a hit in any one part is ever able afterward to repeat the feat, but Mr. Chanfrau has done it. During the twenty years following the first appearance of *Mose*, Mr. Chanfrau played all manner of parts from *Richelieu* to the negro *Wool* in a dramatization of Mrs. Southworth's "Hidden Hand"; among these many parts was that of my Lord Dundreary's brother *Sam*, which he acted for over a hundred nights in New York; and then about eight years ago the actor set before us another picture from American life—a picture as original and as firm in its outlines as *Mose* and far less vulgar. In *Kit* the Arkansas traveler, Mr. Chanfrau presents the South-westerner, the man of the Missouri and the Mississippi. The play, the frame-work into which the character is set, is not remarkable; the villain, for instance, is impossibly villainous and the comic persons are impossibly comic, but in *Kit* himself we have a vivid and vigorous presentation of a simple and manly nature; and Mr. Chanfrau has seized the elements of the character and utilized them with real mimetic skill—in look, in language, in intonation he is the wronged Arkansan, seeking the wife and child stolen from him and devoting himself to the destruction of the man who has robbed him of them. The part of *Kit* is one of strong individuality emphasized by the bold art of the actor; the weak point of the play is that this personality is not shown to us dramatically, it is only exhibited theatrically—that is to say, there is scarcely a single real "situation" in "Kit," there is no inward strife in *Kit's* breast, there is no ebb and flow of emotion. He is set before us pictorially, not revealed to us dramatically; this of course is not the actor's fault, but the play-maker's.

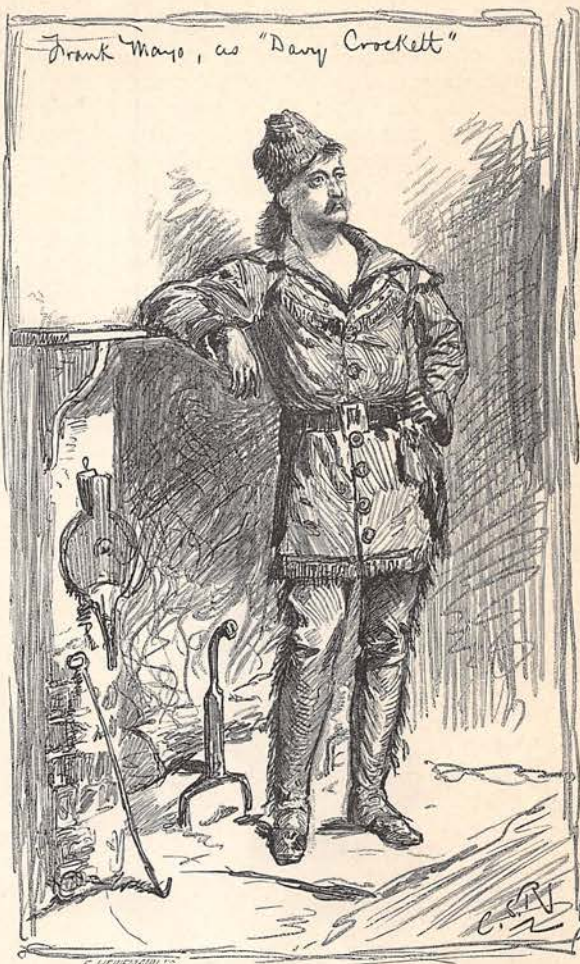
But "Kit" has one great merit, if, as seems probable, the fact that Mr. Spencer had set the Arkansas traveler on the stage suggested to Mr. Murdoch the possibility of putting Davy Crockett into a play. Now, Mr. Murdoch's "Davy Crockett" is a play to be thankful for. Its hero is as little like the real Davy Crockett (a pretty hard customer, I take it) as Robertson's *David Garrick* is like the real David Garrick; in neither play have the situations or the central characters any claim to biographic value. But

the name was popular, and Mr. Murdoch made use of it to provide a background, and to suggest an atmosphere for a character as direct and as manly as *Kit*. *Davy Crockett* is as acceptable to the audience as *Kit*, and he has the advantage over the Arkansas traveler in that the progress of the story gives him occasion to reveal himself in repeated acts of simple heroism. One of these instances of bravery was the "sensation" of the piece. "Sensation," it must be remembered, is only reprehensible when it is obtruded for its own sake; and this "sensation" was perfectly legitimate, since, however thrilling it was in itself, it was developed naturally out of the course of the action, which in turn it helped along; moreover, it did not in any way affect the really pastoral flavor of the play. The story of the piece is in essence identical with that of "Young Lochinvar,"—a resemblance by no means concealed on the part of the playwright, but brought at once into view by the skillful use of the ballad to stir the soul of the young hunter, and to awaken him to a consciousness of his love and to the possibility, perhaps, of its success. The heroine and the man whom her father intends her to marry are forced to take shelter in *Davy Crockett's* cabin. Here, to give her warmth, he burns the bar of the door, while she reads him Scott's ballad. Of a sudden, the moaning of wolves is heard. The door, now lacking its bar, is open to any. Quick as thought *Davy Crockett*

thrusts his arm through the staples, in lieu of the bar, and stands to his post until daylight drives away the wolves. This scene—the hero holding the door while the wolves are howling around the lonely cabin and thrusting their heads into the frequent crevices—this is the "sensation" of the play. Like the ballad which serves as the back-bone of the piece, the situation is a reminiscence of Scott, and had already been borrowed from the *Waverley* novels to do duty in a drama by the elder Dumas, a writer of enormous originality and productive capacity, who, however, was never above

"lifting" a trifle like this when it happened to hit his fancy.

The author of "*Davy Crockett*," Mr. Frank Hitchcock, had taken the pen-name of Murdoch, borrowing it from his maternal



uncle, Mr. James E. Murdoch, the Shaksperian reader and actor. He had written other plays, one of which, called "*Bohemia*," was brought out at the Arch Street Theatre, in Philadelphia, and was so hardly handled by the critics that the author lost faith and hope and died at the early age of thirty.

"'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an article."

Writing to Mr. Frank Mayo, he spoke of the criticisms on his play and said, "Ah, well, they have struck home"; and in two

days he was dead from brain fever. He did not even live to see Mr. Mayo bring out "Davy Crockett" in 1872 at the Rochester Theatre, which the actor was then managing; and it is perhaps as well that he did not,—for the play failed dismally when first acted. But the actor had more healthy obstinacy; he believed firmly in the piece, and he soon found the public beginning to appreciate it. The play was fortunate in falling into the hands of an actor who not only had faith in it, but whose experience and appearance fitted him fully for the part of the hero. Mr. Mayo's robust and ample style suits the stalwart character of the strong-armed and quick-witted frontiersman, while his sympathetic feeling for ideal beauty has led him to round out the part by many a delicate touch and finishing stroke, added one by one during nearly two thousand performances of the play throughout the Union.

The Davy Crockett of real life, the Davy Crockett before whose rifle the 'coon prom-



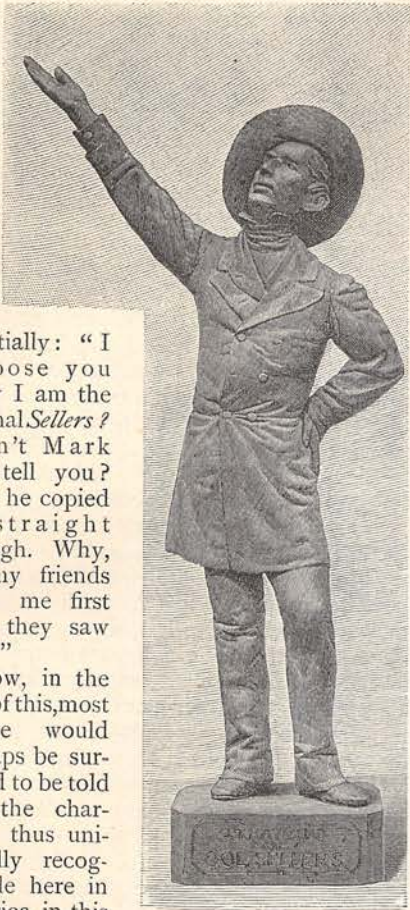
MR. W. J. FLORENCE AS "HON. BARDWELL SLOTE," IN "THE MIGHTY DOLLAR."

ised to come down, was something of a politician, taking the stump at times, and even getting himself elected to Congress. And a personage who came into existence almost

at the same time as the mimic Crockett was like the real Crockett, in that he was a South-western politician. *Colonel Mulberry Sellers* had taken part in the recent unpleasantness; he was on the defeated side, but magnanimously resolving to let by-gones be by-gones, he soon determined "to go in for the OLD FLAG!—and an appropriation." *Colonel Sellers* is a gentleman of magnificent vistas. He sees vast avenues of wealth opened to him on all sides by his ever alert invention, and, in the meantime, is as poor as a church mouse. But no poverty can dull the edge of his quick-set intellect. If his steamboat scheme fails, he takes up a corn speculation; he sees "millions in it;" and if that flags he can fall back on hogs—and feed the corn to them. He has an unbounded faith in himself, a faith which most of his associates needs must share,* despite his frequent mishaps and miscalculations. Now there was in this character something which exactly fell in with the times, and it was small wonder as soon as the novel of

Messrs. Clemens and Warner was issued, that an enterprising play-maker sought to set the sanguine *Sellers* at once upon the stage. This first adaptation had the good luck to be bought by the one actor who, by temperament and training, was capable of doing it justice. In the hands of Mr. John T. Raymond, the careless, reckless, airy brag and boundless anticipations of the character were rounded into a harmonious whole, and the character itself was shown to be simple and strong behind all its eccentricities. And there was something in it that all Americans, in those days when the gilding was first washed from the age most of us had taken for solid gold,—there was something in it we all could recognize; in fact, there was scarce one of us who had not *Colonel Sellers* or some blood-relative of his for a friend; there was scarce one of us who had not put money in schemes hardly more fantastic than the visionary Kentuckian's Oriental Eye-water. Indeed, this general recognition of the truth of the character was pushed so far as to point out not one, but many originals, from whom the portrait had been

drawn. Mr. Raymond has told me that he rarely acts the character for a week, in any part of the country, without having at least one inhabitant of the place say to him con-



MR. JOHN T. RAYMOND AS "COLONEL SELLERS" IN "THE GILDED AGE."
(FROM THE STATUETTE BY MR. J. S. HARTLEY.)

fidentially: "I suppose you know I am the original Sellers? Didn't Mark ever tell you? Well, he copied me straight through. Why, all my friends knew me first time they saw you!"

Now, in the face of this, most people would perhaps be surprised to be told that the character thus universally recognizable here in America in this gilded age of ours was no less well known in the golden age of England, under the successor of Elizabeth. But such is the fact. There is extant a comedy by one Ben Jonson, first acted at the Blackfriars Theatre in 1616. It is called "The Divell is an Ass," and it contains a character, *Meercraft*, who is seemingly a direct ancestor of our friend *Colonel Sellers*. His very first speech is:

* * * Sir, money is
Fit to run out on errands; let her go.
Via, pecunia! When she's run and gone,
And fled, and dead; then will I fetch her again,
With *aqua vitae*, out of an old hogshead!
While there are lees of wine, or dregs of beer,
I'll never want her! Coin her out of cobwebs,
Sir, and make grass grow out of marrow bones,
Dust, but I'll have her! Raise wool upon egg-
shells,
To make her come * * * * *
* * * I would not see the creature
Of flesh and blood, the man, the prince indeed,

That could employ so many millions
As I would help him to.

["The Divell is an Ass," Act ii. scene 1.

So much for his general declaration: in his particular projects he also foreshadows the Kentucky colonel. He takes a prospectus from his attendant—

What hast thou there?

O! 'Making wine of raisins': this is in hand now.
Eugene. Is not that strange, sir, to make wine of raisins?

Meercraft. Yes, and as true a wine as the wines of France,
Or Spain or Italy: look of what grape
My raisin is, that wine I'll render perfect,
As of the Muscatel grape, I'll render Muscatel;
Of the Canary, his; the claret, his;
So of all kinds: and bate you of the prices
Of wine throughout the kingdom half in half.

Eug. But now, sir, if you raise the other commodity,
Raisins?

Meercraft. Why, then I'll make it out of black-berries
And it shall do the same. 'Tis but more art,
And the charge less.

[Act ii., scene 1.

And in a later act another money-making scheme is suggested which runs easily in team with *Colonel Mulberry Sellers's* Infallible Oriental Eye-Water.

Lady T. Do you hear?

Have you a business about tooth-picks?

Meercraft. Yes, madam:
Did I ne'er tell it you? I meant to have offer'd it
Your ladyship, on the perfecting the patent.

Lady T. How is it?

Meercraft. For serving the whole state with
tooth-picks;

Somewhat an intricate business to discourse: but I show how much the subject is abused,
First, in that one commodity; then what diseases
And putrefactions in the gums are bred,
By those are made of adulterate and false wood;
My plot for reformation of these, follows:
To have all tooth-picks brought into an office,
There seal'd, and such as counterfeit them mulcted.
And last, for vending them, to have a book
Printed, to teach their use, which every child
Shall have throughout the kingdom, that can read,
And learn to pick his teeth by: which beginning
Early to practise, with some other rules,
Of never sleeping with the mouth open, chewing
Some grains of mastick, will preserve the breath
Pure and so free from taint—

[Act iv., scene 1.

Unfortunately, this all seems insincere and hollow, for *Meercraft* is a conscious knave who but devises these schemes the better to befool gullible mankind; while our *Colonel Sellers* is as honest as may be and as sincere, and deceives himself quite as much as he deceives his neighbor. Still the comparison is curious.

Unfortunately, too, "The Divell is an Ass"

is a much better play than "The Gilded Age," which has nearly every fault a play can have and still stand the glare of the foot-lights. After Mr. Raymond had bought the first stage-adaptation of the story, he found it was unauthorized, and that Mr. Clemens had expressly reserved the right to dramatize his novel, so that actor and author made a new compact, and the play in which Mr. Raymond now acts is the work of Mark Twain himself. It is difficult to speak of it seriously; its construction is infantine; its introduction of a steamboat explosion is puerile; its incidents, where they are not forced and improbable, are trivial and trite; it has no dramatic development of either action or character; even *Colonel Sellers* himself has no vital connection with the story and is exhibited to us merely in speech instead of being shown in action. It is only in the trial scene that the actor has a chance to do much else than talk; and in connection with this it is to be noted that the only scene in "Ah Sin," by Messrs. Bret Harte and Mark Twain (and the second play of each of them), which had any value or merit whatever was the spirited and characteristic trial before Judge Lynch in the last act, a scene worthy of the hand that wrote the classic "Buck Fanshaw's Funeral," or of the other and gentler hand which set down for us the fate of the "Outcasts of Poker Flat."

Author after author has attempted a picture of the manners and morals of society at the capital of the nation. In Mr. Benedict's "My Daughter Elinor," in Mr. Harte's "Story of a Mine," in Mr. De Forest's "Honest John Vane" and again in his "Playing the Mischief," we get either a slight glimpse or a full view of the lobby and of the man "inside politics"; even *Colonel Sellers* must needs come to Washington to see in person after that appropriation. When the stage made its next snatch for another typical American it grasped a full-fledged member of the lower house, engaged in feathering his own nest. *Judge Bardwell Slote* is M. C. for the Cohosh district. He appears in a play called "The Mighty Dollar," by Mr. B. E. Woolf. He is a good-natured, well-meaning, half-educated politician, with little knowledge and no principles. He is a fair specimen of those who take the stump before election, only to roll logs after it. The part is played by Mr. W. J. Florence with a richness of humorous caricature which almost redeems the inherent vulgarity of the character. The

performance is pitched in a burlesque key, and in quiet burlesque informed with drollery Mr. Florence is admirable. He acts the character with great zest, and in marvelous "make-up." The smirking, grasping, greedy, shrewd and yet simple politician has been endowed by the author of the play with certain superficial characteristics of which the actor makes the most. Chief among these is a habit of precluding a phrase with the initials of its words, and as the orthography of *Judge Slote* is not impeccable, the result is often absurdly comic. This peculiarity is only veneered on; it is not of necessity a part of the conception of *Slote*, who in all essentials would remain the same without this trick. And here we have a fault frequently found in American writing for the stage: a bundle of characteristics is too often substituted for character, in spite of the fact that characteristics are at best but the finger-posts to character.

"The Mighty Dollar," which first put in an appearance in New York in September, 1875, was originally designated as "an American comedy," a designation very soon changed to "a humorous satire." In truth, the piece was neither comedy nor satire. In as far as it was good—that is to say, in the parts played by Mr. Florence and by Mrs. Florence, who, as *Mrs. General Gilflory*, represented a sort of American *Mrs. Malaprop*, who had been born here and had spent much of her time in the demoralizing circles of the American colony in Paris,—in these parts it was a not unskillful blending of farce and burlesque. All the rest of it was most dreary stuff akin to the so-called "society-plays" with which we are often afflicted, and inferior to them in that it lacked motive and cohesion. In spite of these obvious defects, "The Mighty Dollar" was carried for over a hundred nights at the Park Theatre, where "The Gilded Age" had previously achieved a hundred performances. Both plays have been acted at other theaters in this city again and again, meeting with acceptance in spite of faults visible to the youngest of play-goers, and owing their success solely to the fact that the principal figure in each was represented with remarkable skill, and contained elements of character readily recognizable by all.

I have purposely omitted until now all mention of two characters of American growth as widely known as any hitherto here described—*Solon Shingle* and *Rip Van Winkle*. I place the two parts together

because, although they are at present identified with two different actors whose performances of them have been widely appreciated, they have received the shape they now retain at the hands of one man—the late Charles Burke, who died in 1854, at the early age of thirty-two. A most promising career was thus untimely ended. Charles Burke was the half-brother of Mr. Joseph Jefferson, who often played with him in minor parts, and who cherishes his memory in the greatest respect. Mr. Jefferson has even been known to say that if “my brother Charley had only lived, the world would never have heard of me,”—an assertion which may well be doubted by any one who can appreciate the truth and delicacy of Mr. Jefferson’s own endeavors as an actor. About the middle of this century, when Mr. Chanfrau, just after his success as *Mose*, was managing the National Theatre, Charles Burke was his stage-manager,—“and he was the best stage-manager I ever knew, except Mitchell,” said Mr. Chanfrau, when telling the writer the circumstances of Burke’s first appearance as *Solon Shingle*. One day, in looking over a lot of MS. plays, Mr. Chanfrau found the “People’s Lawyer,” a two-act comedy by Dr. J. S. Jones, of Boston, a prolific playwright thirty or forty years ago. Knowing that it contained a Yankee part, played originally by an old actor named Spear, now in the Forrest Home, and performed afterward by Hill, Mr. Chanfrau drew it to the attention of Burke, who had often before played Yankee parts with success. A few weeks later the piece was produced with Burke as *Solon Shingle*. Spear and Hill, whom Burke had never seen in the part, had played it as a sort of young and Yankee *Paul Pry*. Burke, bringing to all his work a precious faculty of seeing and thinking for himself, appeared as an old and simple-minded Massachusetts farmer, intent on “his barl o’ apple-sass.” Burke’s success in the part brought the play again into notice, and in 1854 the part of *Solon Shingle* was acted at the Baltimore Museum by Mr. John E. Owens, whose ownership of the character has never since been disputed. Ten years later, on August 31st, 1864, at the old Broadway Theatre, just below Broome street, Mr. Owens’ performance of *Solon Shingle* met with the immediate and marked popular approval of the metropolis, and the little old-fashioned play was one of the greatest successes of the season. Mr. Owens has more than once played it again in this city, and his acting

of *Solon Shingle* is always seen with pleasure. He gives us a direct and simple picture of a homely New England farmer, loquacious, inquisitive, shrewd in a measure, full of his own importance,—a picture which recalls Mr. Winslow Homer’s studies of farm-life,—a picture not sufficiently ideal to call out the finest qualities of the actor, but real and distinct to an extraordinary degree.

In “Rip Van Winkle,” Burke’s share was less. The first dramatic version of Washington Irving’s legend was produced at the Park Theatre in this city, April 22, 1830, by Hackett. Afterward, when Hackett appeared in London, this adaptation was revised by Bayle Bernard. Hackett’s performance of *Rip* is greatly praised by no less an authority than Sol. Smith, who considered him without a rival in the part. “I should despair,” he writes, “of finding a man or woman in an audience of five hundred who could hear Hackett’s utterance of five words in the second act, ‘But she was mine vrow,’ without experiencing some moisture in the eyes.” Burke, about the middle of the century, prepared his own version of the play, which is extant in print. Like Hackett’s, it is in two acts, and—like Hackett’s again in all probability—it leans unduly toward broad fun. Burke’s version did not differ greatly from Hackett’s, and one or the other of them was acted about all over the country by any performer who took a fancy to the character. Mr. Chanfrau, for instance, played the part repeatedly for several years. There was thus accumulated by this exercising of many minds trained in theatrical perception, a fund of “business,” of bits of dialogue and bits of by-play, all tending toward the elaboration of the character and its greater effect before the foot-lights. But all was vague and varying, and greatly needed condensation and reduction to coherence.

At this time, in 1865, there arrived in England from Australia a young American actor, Mr. Joseph Jefferson, the third bearer of this honored name on the American stage, and the original performer, it may be noted, of two well-known Yankee parts, *Salem Scudder* in “The Octoroon,” and *Asa Trenchard* in “The American Cousin,” both of which in his hands became possible beings, not the impossible caricatures we generally see them. To gain the opportunity of acting in London a new play was needed. Mr. Jefferson had played in “Rip Van Winkle” with his half-brother, and had since acted the character himself in America

and Australia with great success, and was thus possessed of all the traditions of the part, besides much "business" invented by himself. This mass of material he took to Mr. Dion Boucicault. The dramatist soon extracted from the actor's notes and notions the very clever play as we now have it, for the first time appearing in three acts, owing

don Adelphi Theatre, and Mr. Jefferson's success was instantaneous and prolonged. A year later, Mr. Jefferson appeared as *Rip* at the Olympic Theatre in New York, and at the end of this engagement, he played the part throughout the country with unceasing approval.

Mr. Jefferson is an actor of exquisite art.



to the development of the scene with Hudson's men. This scene existed in the old versions, but now takes a whole act to itself, and an act in which not a word is spoken save by *Rip* himself, excepting only the ghostly toast carried by the elfish spirits to "Rip! Rip! Rip!" In September, 1865, the transformed play was produced at the Lon-

As a comedian, he would hold his own beside the finest comic artists of France—M. Regnier, M. Got, M. Coquelin. The portrait he presents of *Rip Van Winkle* is a singularly felicitous example of the possible union of great breadth and freedom of effect with the utmost delicacy and refinement. Mr. Jefferson's *Rip Van Winkle* has an ideal

elevation, while at the same time, it is thoroughly human. It is saturated with kindly and wholesome humor, and the spirit of gentleness pervades it. Although *Rip* himself is an idle good-for-nothing and ne'er-do-well, we accept Mr. Jefferson's presentation of him as a personification of the beautiful and the good.

These are the principal types of American character which the dramatic art has sought to set on our stage. If comedy be a mirror in which the age is reflected and in which we are to see ourselves, then these plays show the age to be a very queer age and exhibit us as a very peculiar people. If, as De Quincey says, "the acknowledged duty of comedy" is "to fathom the coynesses of human nature and to arrest the fleeting phenomena of human demeanor," then the American comedy we have been here considering has been most remiss in its duty, for it has neither fathomed coynesses, nor arrested phenomena; rarely has it even hinted that human nature had any coyness, and its only suggestion of phenomena was in the sense in which the word was used by Mr. Crumple, the father of the infant. The most that can be said for it is that it has seized and concentrated certain of the floating characteristics of the many atoms of American life, presenting them before us with the rigor and the vigor of a photograph,—sometimes the pose has been chosen with more taste, sometimes the photograph has been more skillfully manipulated than at others; at best, the result is mechanical and lacks the freedom of art. We have had hitherto in comedy outline types, as it were, the equivalent of the conventional characters of the early Italian *commedie dell' arte*. *Mose* is from New York, and *Asa Trenchard* is from Vermont, and *Judge Bardwell Slote* is from the Cohosh district, just as *Pantaloone* was from Venice and

Punchinello from Naples. With the change of time we are ready and fit for something more and something finer.

The first requisite of the stage is strongly defined characters, well contrasted; human nature is the fund on which the dramatist may draw at will. De Quincey, in the essay from which a quotation has already been made, declares that "Comedy, as the reflex of the current of social life, will shift in correspondence to the shifting movements of civilization. Inevitably, as human intercourse in cities grows more refined, comedy will grow more subtle; it will build itself on distinctions of character less grossly defined, and on features of manners more delicate and impalpable." It is to be hoped that in due course of time some one will supply the demand



MR. JOSEPH JEFFERSON AS "RIP VAN WINKLE."

which has thus arisen for a dramatist capable of putting an American on the stage as true to life as *Colonel Sellers* and far more subtle than *Judge Slote*,—one in fact whom we shall all be as willing to acknowledge as we are Winthrop's *John Brent*, Mr. Harte's *John Oakhurst* or Mr. James's *Christopher Newman*.